International Journal of Multidisciplinary Approach and Studies

ISSN NO:: 2348 – 537X

Emerging Trends in the Study of Religion: An Interfaith Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Emerging trends in religion are challenging the prevailing attitude about the religious phenomenon. Contemporary polycentric world is compelling different faiths to interact with new knowledge. Advanced means of communications especially information technology are providing desirable space for different faiths to have faster interaction with each other. Secondly, the process of globalization provides various options and varieties. Due to this, human beings are becoming more and more open to acquire new information, but on the other side, they seem to get puzzled towards their own as well as other faiths. Thirdly, after the end of modernity, the rebirth or revival of religion is becoming a part of discussion and new forms of religion especially new religious movements are catching the attention of the world. However, the crisis of religious identity is rising as a serious challenge and clashes among the religions are increasing on the globe. Consequently, the present world is observing contradictory and opposite trends in the field of religion. In interfaith studies, the major issue is to examine the nature of dialogue among the religious communities. In this course, the key problem is how different faith traditions approach their own as well as other faiths. In fact, dialogue among the faiths is an important feature of interfaith perspective. In this paper we are trying to understand some emerging trends in the the study of religion in the reference of interfaith understandings.

INTRODUCTION:

Present world is getting the experiences of rapid changes; consequently, several faith traditions are receiving new knowledge. Scholars from different faith traditions are applying multiple approaches to understand their own faith tradition as well as other faiths. Now interfaith perspectives are taking central position in religious studies. Mainly two issues are becoming important in this field. First is theoretical i.e. the vision of faith or faiths towards

Ultimate Reality. Second, is practical: how people deal with the other faith traditions. Are they accommodative to the people of other faiths to live together in present polycentric world?

In interfaith studies, the major issue is to examine the nature of dialogue among the religious communities. This is not a movement to create a unity in religion rather understanding is its main purpose. When we are talking about the interfaith dialogue, it does not to mean only dialogue among the different faith traditions. However, it includes the sense of dialogue within a religion. In this course, the key problem is how different faith traditions approach their own as well as other faiths. In fact, dialogue among the faiths is an important feature of interfaith perspective.

CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue is an essential element of human life. It starts when people meet or interact. The word "Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means 'the word', or in our case, we would think of the 'meaning of the word'. And dia means 'though'-it doesn't mean 'two'. A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person has a sense of dialogue within himself. (Bohm: 1996; 6)" M. Massoudi tries to understand the concept of dialogue in a system theory. He notes, "A dialogue usually occurs between two or more individuals, although it is not possible to have an internal dialogue. Each individual, in general, has a different set of ideals and beliefs, memories and upbringing. It is difficult to think that entering a dialogue would be an easy encounter. Within the context of the modified systems approach, each individual is a boundless system, full of potential energy of the spiritual type. (2011; 432)" Therefore, dialogue is an interaction among and within the human beings. Dialogue can only be based on the principle that "absolutely different centers-and along with them whole respective spheres-encompass each other. (Arapura: 1972; 112)" Dialogue is a meaningful interaction among the human beings. Sociologists agree on this assumption that human beings learn the rules and ways of social life during the interaction. In human interaction, dialogue plays a vital role because people know each other through dialogue.

Dialogue means to understand other/other's view not to make one point of view succeed over another. The aim of dialogue is not to reach consensus but to provide a common platform for different viewpoints. Differences are not ignored in dialogue but are recognized. Main

purpose of dialogue is to learn from experience of others not to teach them. In this process, listening is most important before saying.

Interfaith Dialogue

General dialogue is a spontaneous process and a basic need of social life but an interfaith dialogue requires a specific approach. In fact, an interfaith dialogue is a part of overall dialogue but it is more problematic and complex phenomenon. However, Interfaith or inter religious dialogue is a need of the day. This is a way for creative development of human resources to build peace, tolerance, richness in human values and communal harmony in the world. But, interfaith dialogue is not an easy task because faith is a sensitive phenomenon "When the dialogue is about religion or about a very sensitive issue the ability to reason should be complemented by a certain quality of heart, namely the ability to feel the suffering of others. A dialogue is a balance exchange of one's emotions and one's reasoning with another person. Therefore, certain qualities, such as respect and tolerance for other people's point of view, are necessary but not sufficient. There must be a genuine belief that the other person's point of view is as valid and as appropriate as one's own point of view or path. (ibid: 2011; 427)" Meaningful dialogue leads to recognizing the dignity of the others and their respective viewpoints. In the course of dialogue each emotion, sentiment or faith should have equal right to maintain his or her respective dignity and freedom. Respecting the sentiments of the others is a basic requirement of dialogue. However, people or scholars have emotional attachment to their own positions. Generally, they claim that their ideas or views are only original and true.

The major function of dialogue is to amplify the interaction and promoting the sentiment of togetherness. In addition to this, it also reduces the feeling of threat. "Authentic dialogue of the 'truth-seeking' kind, in which each participant may gain from the experience and insights of the others, becomes feasible." (Hick; 1994; 108) In fact, every religion has some moral and ethical values such as humanity, honesty, mercy, tolerance, love and services for the goodwill of the social life. Thus, the experiences of different faiths help to enrich human social life. Dialogue is a way to understand one's own as well as other's viewpoints.

Dialogue within the faith communities is a fundamental need of today. Generally, people misunderstand the interfaith dialogue. It is not a dialogue in the religions. It is a dialogue among the people of different religious traditions as well as within the people of same tradition. "A dialogue of faiths has to be a genuine religious encounter. This is possible only

when the partners in the dialogue have firm commitment to their own respective faiths and chosen set of values. The religious encounter should religiously pursue. Do not soft-pedal one's personal commitment." (Wazir Singh:2001;68) Dialogue in the religious traditions is very complicated and complex phenomenon because faith is a system of beliefs. The term belief describes dispositional attitude of the believer to object (it may be visible or invisible) of creed. That way faith refers to the one's trust, commitment, or belief in God. In broader sense, faith is defined in terms of belief, devotion, dedication, commitment and dependence on super power. Thus, the faith is a human response or belief to the presence of the Divine. Generally faith or religion both are used in identical sense. However, no single definition is possible for faith or religion. There are varied set of traditions, practices and beliefs that constitute the religion. The major traditions in the world are involved in their belief in God or gods but this is not true to all. In fact, belief in God plays a central role in the formation of the religion but the concept of God is not same to all traditions. Every tradition has its own perspective about God or Ultimate Reality. Yet almost every faith tradition believes that there is Truth, which is beyond the human imagination or knowledge. What is that Truth? This question has several answers; all may be acceptable because of faith. Main problem of interfaith understanding is that every faith tradition has its own perspective of Reality, and each tradition claims that one perspective is true which is usually their own. Therefore, the singular claim on Truth is a major problem in interfaith dialogue that is also a main cause of split in a religion or religions.

Many faith traditions in the world have split into various cults and denominations and all have claims that they are only true followers of their faith. Diversity exists within the basic systems of religion. "For example, within the Christianity, believers differ significantly on the name of God. Some see God as all controlling, others as self-limiting and still others as incapable in principle of unilaterally controlling any aspect of reality. Some believe God to have infallible knowledge only of all that has occurred or is occurring, others claim God also has knowledge of all that will actually occur, while those who believe God possesses middle knowledge add that God knows all that would actually occur in any possible context. (Basinger: 2002; 2)" This phenomenon is common to all religious traditions. "There are the major historical divisions within many traditions such as between Orthodox Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity, or between Sunni and Shi'a form of Islam." (Nye:2003) In

Hinduism, many cults are opposing each other. Different views towards reality are acceptable but claim on it becomes the cause of conflicts.

To build a peaceful and harmonious world there is need to start constrictive interaction within the faith traditions. Interfaith dialogue is not only an interaction in a religion in addition to that dialogue should open to all. It is an active attempt to understand the faiths of each other. The main objective of this attempt is to create a mutual respect and tolerance. It is a collective effort to develop a peaceful and harmonious world without harming the dignity of any religion. Every faith tradition has right to interact with other traditions and each faith tradition has privileges to implicate in reinterpretation of their beliefs in contemporary context. However, an interfaith dialogue is a common attempt to understand or attain the mystic Reality. "It is today one of the responsibility of a student of religion to understand the existence of other religions, each with its own specific structure and background, with its own claims. The different religious traditions are governed by the same spirit, and work for the redemption of both man and the universe. Cosmic salvation is the aim of all religions. (Radhakrishnan: 1997; 129)" Actually, every religion has some insights that are also common in other faith traditions yet they have their own claim on Truth. Every faith that may be small or large, old or new should be involved in dialogue. So the interfaith "Dialogue is an encounter when people holding different claims about Ultimate Reality meet together to explore these claims in a context of mutual respect. From dialogue, we expect to discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of the Ultimate Reality. Interfaith dialogue dissolves rigidities of religious exclusiveness and brings inter religious understanding and inter-community accommodation, unity and harmony. (Dharm Singh: 2010; 112)"

In earlier times, people lived in their closed associations and they had face-to-face interaction. At that time, largely faith traditions lived in specific boundaries and their religious practices were formal. Now we are living in polycentric world. People from different religions and cultures are migrating from their locale to others spaces and are living together. In this multi-faith world, people from different religious traditions are sharing their experiences. In this course, various approaches and techniques for spiritual practices are becoming approachable to all. The means of communication are making easier interaction on the globe. In these days, personal techniques for mystic attainment like, yoga and meditation are transforming into public phenomenon. Present world observes that yoga and meditation

organizations have a global network and they are spreading in the world. New world interaction is creating a mixture of various forms of spirituality. Mehrdad Massoudi observes the importance of dialogue in spiritual life and he notes “Although there are many methods to achieve spiritual transformation, dialogue makes us consider issues which we may not ordinarily think of if we sit in a cave, meditating and gazing at a wall. Dialogue is a dynamic process whereby one exchanges (spiritual) energy with the other, and under the right conditions this process could be wonderful spiritual experience, leading to unity with other and, ultimately, with the ‘whole.’ Other methods, such as vision quests, meditation and worship have been used throughout the ages. To expect that a single dialogue (or for that matter a single period of meditation or any other transformational practices) can change one’s perception would be negative. Dialogue, similar to other spiritual practices, requires humility, honesty, hard work, faith and hope. (2011; 432-33)” Mutual exchange provides variety of options and by taking such experience; the achiever realizes that several routes converge at the same point. In this experience, a person knows that different methods and styles go to the God and various faith traditions belong to the same spirit. That way an interfaith dialogue helps in the building of peaceful culture.

Religious co-existence demands peaceful and harmonious relationships. To maintain such relations, dialogue between different faiths is a way. In fact, multiple viewpoints enrich the life and make it colorful. Different religious communities in this world have to accept the reality that religious plurality is a practical approach towards other faiths. Each religion however small or large has equal rights to live in freedom.

Problems and Possibilities for Interfaith Dialogue

Contemporary world is facing contradictory practices in the area of religion. On one side, people of different faith communities are living together and they are trying to understand each other but on the other, religious conflicts are threatening the world peace. World conditions are changing albeit religious attitude are not transforming according to the new conditions. Still various faith traditions have exclusive claims on God, which are a serious challenge for the contemporary world. Radhakrishnan observes that such claims are not true because there are many descriptions of God; such are points of view and not objects of knowledge. He also tries to understand the cause of religious conflict. He notes, “When we hold the imaginative pictures of the Divine with fervor, we tend to become intolerant. Hatred

is the product of intolerance, and persecutions are born of hatred. Antisemitism arose out of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus by a Jew, a misunderstanding two thousand years old. From Nebuchadnezzar to Hitler, the Jews were condemned and the same terms were used as by Tacitus who says: 'Moses, the better to bind the nation to himself instituted new rites, contrary to those of all other mortals. Here all that we worship is flouted: in return all that is impure in our eyes is allowed.' On the other hand, the Jews affirm that they had a special role in God's dealings with the world. God chose the Jews to be the special people and revealed to them through prophets and lawgivers the truth about himself. Jesus was born among the Jews. (Radhakrishnan: 1997; 123)" Actually, claims on truth are not reserve to any faith. Every faith tradition has the right to conceive the truth according to its desire. If one religious tradition has claim that only their faith is true that shows the path of salvation or liberation, it automatically has closed the doors of knowledge for itself. But, knowledge is dynamic and always grows in freedom. Actually enlightened traditions enjoy the freedom, because open-minded people do not live in fear. The faith traditions that live in insecurity do not share their experiences with other traditions. Every religion demands full freedom and choice to meet the God. Thus, the pure or true spirit of religion deserves real sensibility. A sensible person likes others because he knows that they have the same spirit.

Religion has been misunderstood in last few centuries. After the experience of modernity, the world is realizing that to solve the human social problems there is need to understand the true spirit of religion and its role in society. During the speedy process of modern change, the role of religion was ignored. Without the true spirit of religion now, human life is facing many problems and contradictions. Consequently, present world is searching various alternatives and ways to live enjoyable life. Again, this question demands serious consideration: Does religion help to maintain peace in the present world? However, religion is not an ideology; it is commitment, dedication and feeling of love for the Creator and His creation. To understand the real spirit of religion in each phase of knowledge people have tried to interpret their faiths as per their requirements. Human life is dynamic by its nature. Every phase of life necessitates fresh interpretation of religion. "Now we live in the post-metaphysical age in which there are no absolute truths, only interpretations, the category of belief can again be taken seriously as constitute our lived tradition. (Robbins: 2007; 17) Thus, in this age, interfaith interpretation of religion is becoming a requirement of human social life. The new

approaches towards religious traditions are accommodating and accepting different dreams and thoughts because truth is endless and is not to be confined to a particular faith.

In addition to that, advanced means of communications especially information technology, has opened up desirable space for different faiths to have faster interaction with others viewpoints. In this, emerging world human beings are penetrating in different faiths and getting multiple ways for their peace of mind. People are becoming passionate to learn more and more about spirituality. The exchanges of spiritual experiences present two fold results. First is constructive because in this process people know other viewpoints. While, second is destructive. In the course of speedy interaction, there is every chance of its going out of control. People are taking the experiences from others but at the same time, they have their own claims. Without transforming themselves into new, they face contradictions. Therefore, essenceless 'spirituality' and its experience give short-term benefits but after some time they realize that, their desire is still incomplete and they choose another method to attain the peace but they always live with a sort of void in the spirit. That way popular spirituality is looking fascinating but on the other side, it has its own problems. "Creative exchange between the religions at many levels has begun to take place as part of our human response to the massive global crises of our day. The substance of this exchange ought not to be simply a question of how the traditions can co-operate in practical ways to bring about change for a better world order, though that would be no small achievement. It is also a matter how the global conditions themselves challenge our vision of ultimate reality. (Race: 1995; 165)" The present global conditions are providing multiple perspectives towards ultimate reality and interfaith understanding is taking a central position. Exclusive claims are not acceptable in present vision. Now people are thinking that every idea or faith is unique and special. In the present context, flexible pluralistic approaches towards Ultimate Reality are becoming significant because in the present world no religion or thought can have claim on the truth. Every small or large, old or new faith tradition is unique no specific religion is superior or inferior. "We tend to reject the myth of Christian or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist or Sikh uniqueness: the notion of religious superiority is just a false myth. No religion can lay claim to be the full and final revelation of truth and thus be the norm for others. The great world religions with their diverse teachings and practices constitute authentic paths to the supreme good, and they should be accepted and appreciated as such. (Dharm Singh: 2010; 39)" In

these days, old myths or claims are changing and people from different faiths are recognizing the other traditions and interested to know about them.

No doubt that present world conditions are favorable for interfaith dialogue but dialogue among the religions is not so easy. Arapura J.G. identifies the problem of interfaith dialogue asserting, “There is no easy way to bring about openness in religion as it can never be a simple or straightforward achievement. Religions are condemned to maintain loyalty to their own universal truths, more often than not by behaving in a very un-universalistic fashion. The authenticity of religion itself depends upon such loyalty which bespeaks its essentially supra-human, transcendent origin in revelation that no religion can afford to surrender. (1992; 114)” Actually, almost every religious tradition has rich claims on their revelation; this attitude divides the people into various forms. However, no religious ideology divides the people but their diverse perspectives compel them to do so. Another feature of religion is that it provides a base to unite the people. Nowadays, in the name of religion, some people form groups or organizations that are emerging fast on the scene. Such organizations have their aim and to achieve it every organization is claiming as true believer or follower. Bohm, observes this problem, as “religious people would be the hardest to get together. The assumptions of the different religions are so firmly embedded that I don’t know of any case of two religions, or even subgroups of any given religion’ where they ever got together once they had split. The Christian church for instance, has been talking about trying to get together for ages and it stays about the same all the time. They talk and they appear to get a little bit closer, and then it never happens. They talk about unity, oneness, and love, and all that, but the other assumptions are more powerful; they are programmed into us. Some religious people are trying to get together; they are sincere –they are as serious as they can be- but it seems that they cannot do it. (1996; 13-14)” Present world provide a desirable space for different religious groups because differentiation is transforming into dedifferentiation. Every group or subgroup is able to find its justifications and have its own claims. However to develop cordial relations among the divisions dialogue is the only alternative. Contemporary polycentric world is compelling different faiths to interact with each other. Nowadays, people from different faiths are trying to learn from religious traditions but different traditions are adopting the new knowledge in their own perspectives.

Now it is not conceivable to one religion or faith to live in a closed set-up. In this, interconnected world, pluralist forms of religion are giving their performance on large stage.

It is becoming harder, yet it is impossible, to live in small ghettos. "Many people live next to the neighbors of another faith. Perhaps their children will marry someone from another religion and so, like it or not, but be heirs to more than one way of discerning Transcendence. (Forward: 2007; 119)" In this multi-faith world, the vision of people and their practices are getting multiple experiences. It is fact that the international process of migration in population makes new multi-religious world. "The development of diasporas through transnational migration and settlement creates a range of culturally complex situations. Within the broad 'Hindu diaspora', there are now people of Indian ancestry settled in new contexts across the globe. In each context, their culture and religions are involved in process of transplantation and adaptation, as individuals and groups seek to accommodate their own expectations and ways of life to the local circumstances. The experience of 'being a Hindu' is different in England from the USA, or Fiji, or South Africa. And in particular, the children and later descendants of migrants will make further adaptations and recontexualisations of their traditions.(Nye: 2003; 189)" Migrants practically interact with different faith communities and people of different traditions and try to accommodate them. On another level, they also maintain their links with their own locales through the means of communication. "There is good communication across the globe among people of a particular religious tradition- between Hindus in South Africa and India, and in Fiji and India, and so forth; between Parsis in Hong Kong and Bombay; between Sikhs in Toronto and the Punjab; between Muslims in Indonesia, Arabia, New York and Egypt; between Rastafaris in Jamaica and London; and between Spiritists in Mexico and Chicago. Such good communication tends to unify the religious traditions more (consider the case of the Nation of Islam and its assimilation to mainstream Islam, for instance). It also often means that new resources are put at the disposal of diasporas- as with Saudi grants for Masque-building in Sri Lanka-or conversely flow from the outlying population towards the center, as when propaganda and money for a Sikh independent State is sent from Canada to India. (Smart: 1995; 555-56)" People from a religion maintain their connections by various means because they have common sentiments and commitment. In this process, they are getting new ideas and are gaining knowledge from different faiths. Such knowledge is playing an important role to develop a pluralist out-look and the recent developments on global level are reconstructing a new pluralistic world. Present pluralistic world demands fresh approach towards different faiths. People form various faith communities are searching new ways for their peace of mind

and communal harmony. A positive attitude and harmonious interaction is a right option for this. Secondly, the process of globalization is providing various options and choices in the world-market. However, on the other side present human beings have many alternatives in the field of spirituality. Due to this, human beings are becoming more and more mystified to their own as well as other faiths.

After the end of modernity, the revival (or rebirth) of religion is bringing together the fractured parts of world. The emergence of new religious movements is another reason that persuades for interfaith understandings. "There could be any number of reasons to join inter-religious conversations, perhaps as many reasons as there are persons so engaged. Some will do it because of their intellectual curiosity and their interest in questions of truth. Others will do it because of their intellectual curiosity and their interest in questions of truth other will do it because they discern that different religions seem to present significantly different alternatives in truth-claims, rituals, stories, ethical views and patterns of social arrangements that they respectively offer; they want to learn about those differences and perhaps to benefit from them. These are the ones who are seekers and who are eager to learn anything that may contribute to deepening their religious understanding from whatever source available. Still other may respond to the authorities within their own traditions who have decreed that it is incumbent upon participants in their specific tradition to be open and to be willing to engage in inter-religious dialogue. (Wiggings: 1996; 109)" Above aspects, show that recent developments make us aware for the significance of religion but an exclusive approach towards one's own religion creates barriers among the faiths. A flexible pluralistic approach towards other faiths may be helpful to understand each other.

Generally, an interfaith dialogue is supposed to be a cooperative interaction within the faiths. A constructive approach towards other faiths is the basic requirement for a meaningful dialogue. In addition to that, there should be a need of critical approach towards one's own and other faiths with kindness. Such a dialogue necessitates paying an equal respect to all. Along with this attitude, we should keep ourselves open to learn relatively from others experience. Thus, an interfaith dialogue calls for respect of the rights, autonomy and identity of other faiths.

INTERFAITH STUDIES

Interfaith perspectives are becoming very common in various disciplines and particularly peace studies and religious studies are considering them more seriously. Peace studies and movement for peace pay attention on interfaith dialogue, and main purpose of this is to search the ways for maintaining world peace. The movement of peace necessitates the cordial relationships in different faith traditions. Nevertheless, interfaith studies are undertaking the task to examine the response of different faith traditions towards reality. Presently, "Interfaith studies (with interfaith or inter-religious dialogue being one of its most important branches) has recently become a major field of research. Interfaith studies are not only an interdisciplinary but also a multi-disciplinary field of study and activity; it is not, however, a comparative study. For two individuals (or groups) to enter into an interfaith dialogue the objectives must clearly be defined a priori. To study world religions from an interfaith perspective is one of the most challenging and interesting tasks facing the religious and educational communities on a global scale. (Massoudi: 2011; 422)" So interfaith studies and interfaith movement both have some common aims but their approaches are different. Interfaith movement tries to find out several similar features in different religious traditions. However, scholars in religious studies attempt to understand the attitude of different faiths towards Ultimate Reality or truth in interfaith perspectives. In present social milieu, pluralistic and interfaith perspectives are becoming significant to study the religion because "inter-religious dialogue has a future that might actually result in the dramatic changes in the landscape of the religions of the world only to the degree that it engages the energies and intelligence of scholars of religion in addition to other participants. Further, most of the significant moves in the formal life of inter-religious dialogue have already drawn very healthy upon the scholarly tradition of the study of religion. (Wiggings: 1996; 110-11)"

The discipline of religious studies has observed some fruitful changes in its methodology and subject matter. Different departments of religious studies and theology in various universities of the world are taking serious interest in interfaith studies and interfaith perspectives in religious studies are attaining a central position in syllabi and research. Furthermore, people of present world are taking interest to know about different faith traditions. Paul Badham examines this change as a functional requirement of present world. As per him, "For one consequence of living in a religiously plural society is that any person recognized as an authority in this area will, from time to time, be asked to explain the beliefs, customs and

practices of others. Any priest, minister, rabbi or imam will be expected to be able to explain to the members of the faith community in which he or she ministers what it is that members of an another faith believe. And it is vital that such information be accurate and presented in as dispassionate and objective a manner as possible. It would be also useful if social workers living in pluralist communities had such knowledge; and it is of course a sine qua non that in future all teachers of religious education in schools and directors of television or radio programmes about religion can given an accurate, informed and empathetic account of what the great religions of the world profess and practice. Consequently, the ideal of dispassionate neutral expertise must remain at the core of all religious studies programs and must be taken on board as a requirement for a theology degree as well. If we are to face the challenges of the future the two disciplines will increasingly need each other in order to meet the needs of our modern societies. (1999; 182)"

Scholars, from different faith communities are suggesting interfaith dialogue as an alternative for peaceful world. In the search for a global ethics, Marcus Braybrooke (1992;8-9) illustrates the development of worldwide interfaith movement. He has composed important declarations, statements of different international organizations and conferences. He suggests that interfaith movement should need to oppose the forces of religious extremism; secondly, religious people need to make clear their commitment to the search for truth and defense of human rights. In his comparative perspective, he recognizes the spiritual richness in Christians and Sikhs, and found commonness in both faiths. According to him, "By serving others, one serves God. As the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Scripture) says, 'one who serves and seeks no recompense finds union with the Lord'. And Jesus said, 'Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters you did for me'. (Braybrooke 2002; 24)"

Alan Race (1993; 107) in his study discovers the patterns of the Christian theology of religions. He explains three patterns, i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in his work. He has mission to examine the new Christologies and place in inclusivist and pluralist theories. He observes that historically given political and cultural changes are now reshaping life on the planet, and then from the theoretical and philosophical perspectives of religions themselves this is not sufficient. No doubt, process of modernization has brought drastic changes in human life. Consequently human civilization observed rapid changes in the life. In the course, modernization and its thought made terrible effects on religion. He discovers some drawbacks of secular experience. "After the two centuries of the secular experiment it

is clear that the experiment as a whole has not brought the greater human happiness that it promised. Secularism itself has also proved to be ambivalent, it may have released human beings from an unhealthy dependency on religious authority, but in its pretension to be an alternative all-embracing explanatory system of knowledge, values and practices it too has become oppressive. At practical level, the disjunction between the means and ends of technological production raises ethical questions that are equally disorienting for religious and secularist outlook alike. (Race: 1995: 153)" The rebirth or revival of religion in present world creates new challenges for the secularization model and scholars are putting question marks on this observation. Alan Race is a scholar who explains the function of religion and he suggests the reinterpretation of the religion in contemporary context. He produces valuable work in interfaith studies from Christian theology. His main contribution in this area is that he advocates the pluralist interpretation of the religion especially Christianity. According to him, "The starting-point for the pluralist theory is the validity of the notion of religious experience, which is embodied in various ways in the religious traditions of the world. (Race: 1993; 139)"

John Hick recognizes different perspectives in the field of interfaith studies. He believes that human beings are interacting with Ultimate Reality in different ways and different traditions constitute religious culture. According to him, pluralist approach is appropriate to understand the religious phenomenon. He explains religious pluralism as a "transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality -centeredness [which] is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions. There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation. (Hick: 2007; 610)" In Christian theological terms, "there is plurality of divine revelations, making possible a plurality of forms of saving human response. (Hick: 1994; 34)" He has a different approach from exclusivists and inclusivist interpretation. Hick makes it clear that different faith traditions have their own practices and experiences towards Ultimate Reality. He studies Christian's response and categorizes into three types, e.g.; exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Comparing to other responses he concludes that Pluralistic attitude is authentic. According to him, there are some problems to concur with reality because "each personal experiences Reality as it appears to him in his unique cultural situation. (Peterson: 1996; 560)" John Hick develops pluralistic theory as an alternative of orthodoxy. However, he observes some problem in pluralism. He discusses this problem in detail in his work, "The Problems of Religious Pluralism" and he

summarizes it as "Pluralistic hypothesis raises many questions. What is the divine Reality to which all the great traditions are said to be oriented? Can we really equate the personal Yahweh with the non-personal Brahman, Shiva with the Tao, the Holy Trinity with the Buddhist Trikaya and all with one another? Indeed not the Eastern and Western faiths deal incommensurably with different problems. (Hick; 1994: 39)" Pluralism perspective as such has no problem but human consciousness is not still prepared to accept this approach. Main cause of this problem is that some faith traditions have grand claims on Ultimate Truth.

Martin Forward, tries to understand the inter-religious dialogue in contemporary context. He also discovers three main patterns (exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism) in Christian theology. He summarizes the interfaith discussion as; "To put these patterns at their simplest; the exclusivist maintains that salvation is given only to those who make an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ. The inclusivist affirms that salvation is bestowed to others besides Christians, because of all that God has done through Jesus Christ; and the pluralist affirms that humans are saved within their own faith traditions, not (expect for Christians) because of the person or works of Jesus." Furthermore he observes pluralistic out-look as paradigm shift in the study of religion. According to him "It has been pluralists who have led this debate and others who responded to it. Naturally so, since pluralists are in the vanguard of those who wish for a paradigm shift, away from traditional notions of salvation and Christology, to more tolerant and open-ended attitudes towards the other. (2007;39)"

Ashgar Ali Engineer presents the pluralistic vision of Qur'an. He suggests to Islamic political theorists to work for pluralism. According to him, "It must be made clear to the Islamic community and to the world that there need be no contradiction between the original vision of Islam and a pluralistic democracy. (2005; 218)"

Radhakrishnan, observes that Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or dharma, and so it lives in peace with all religions. He further writes that Hindu thought believes in the reality of One which is described in different ways. The duality assumed for the sake of devotion is more beautiful than even non-duality. Starting from crude modes of worship the devotee should progress to nobler modes. The first stage is image worship; the next consists in meditation and prayer; still higher mental worship; the meditation which is of the form 'I am he' is the highest. The different traditions found in India were all respectfully accepted and justified. (1997; 129-31)" Harold Coward elucidates the Hinduism in context of religious pluralism. He assumed that Hinduism sees itself as

being a very open and tolerant religion. However, "Hindu is no different from those of other religions who believe they have the true revelation and seeks to impose their truth upon others. (Coward: 2000; 125)" Arvin Sharma describes Hindu tradition as a non-exclusive rather than as a non-violent and tolerant tradition. (Sharma: 2005; 60)"

INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVES IN SIKH STUDIES

The Sikhs have rich tradition in interfaith dialogue. However, interfaith studies on Sikh thought are very limited. Western scholars who came to Punjab in nineteenth century have shown their interests in Sikh theology. Many administrators/visitors/scholars including Malcolm (Sketch of the Sikhs: 1812) Cunningham (History of the Sikhs: 1849) and Max Macauliffe (The Sikh religion-six volume, 1909) have produced extensive reviews of Sikhism. But scholars who were related with Singh Sabha movement carried out lot of works on Sikhism. Most discussed work is Hum Hindu Nahin (We are not Hindus) by Kahn Singh Nabha. He employs dialogue style. A Hindu puts on question about Sikh identity and author (Kahn Singh) gives answers. In this book-let, he gives many references from the primary and secondary sources of Sikh religion. He presents the question of Sikh identity in a polite manner. He is the first Sikh scholar who presents the question of Sikh identity in comparative and systematic perspective. After the Independence of India especially when the Punjab State came into form, academic works on Sikh studies have taken boost. Scholars from Punjab have shown their interest in Sikh literature and Sikh History. However, scholars from Sikhism did not show their interest in interfaith studies. Now situation is changing. Many scholars are taking interest in interfaith studies.

General survey of Sikh literature shows that intensive studies on interfaith dialogue are very few. We have found some research papers and edited books. In addition to that, Punjabi University, Patiala and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar has organized seminars and conference on interfaith dialogue. So works in this field are available in scattered shapes however, that give us insights for further investigation.

Bhahi Jodh Singh is first Sikh scholar who tries to understand the Guru Nanak's philosophy in comparative perspective. He attempts to bring out the distinctive feature of the concept of God in Sikhism. He has done a comprehensive review of ancient Indian thought mainly, Raj-yoga, Mimansa and Vedanta and then he gives his views about Sikhism. He notes that "By symbolizing Him (God) as 'Ik –Onkar' i.e. there is but one God, Guru Nanak has rejected the

view of the world's origin from a number of Vedic gods and goddesses. On the other hand, he treats all the gods and goddesses as His creation. The Guru expresses his difference with the theory of God's incarnation by characterizing Him as Unborn. Many of the supporters of Bhakti have been worshiping Siva, Rama and Krishna, considering them as incarnation of the Deity, and the worship of their image was considered by them as means of winning His pleasure. Guru Nanak, however, clearly states that his God does not take birth. That is why no image of His can be made. (1970;56)" Sikh God is formless however, as Creator, He be present in every form, so all inclusive vision of God is significant in interfaith dialogue.

Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia examines the dynamics of the Sikh identity in interfaith perspective. He deals with political and philosophical issues. First, he notes that the participation of Sikhism in interfaith dialogue will, now be from the standpoint of its doctrinal and corporate identity. He makes it clear that the identity-consciousness means, in sense of self-differentiation but not contra-differentiation from other religious traditions and other religious communities. (1999; 103)" Secondly, in philosophical perspective, he presents pluralistic out-look of Sikh thought. He explains the three main philosophical bases of Sikhism. First the nature of Ultimate Reality and he writes, "the intrinsic pluralist spirit of Sikh religion, on the doctrinal level, is clearly stressed by Guru Nanak in his composition japji wherein he refers to the infinity and inexhaustibility of the attributes and aspects of the Divine, not comprehensible in their totality by single revelation. Secondly, in japji itself Guru Nanak accepts the epistemological relativity of the modes of cognition of Ultimate Reality. The form in which Ultimate Reality is known is relative to the mode of apprehension. He expresses this idea figuratively by saying that brave sees God in the form of Might; the intellectual comprehends Him in form of Light (of knowledge); the asethete perceives the Divine in His aspect of beauty; the moralist envisions Him as Goodness, etc. Thirdly, apart from the relativity of the modes of revelation, Sikh religion contends not only the universality but also the historicity of the content of revelation, whereby each revelation is seen as a historically conditioned expressive from God. (ibid; 109)"

Gopal Singh illustrates some practical aspects of Sikhism that are significant to pluralistic attitude. He notes that Guru has transformed the human personality into new and that new creation is not limited to time, space, culture, caste or creed. He gives his observations as, "After being initiates into the faith (Sikh religion) by the Master, he imitates him in turn into the Order. No food is forbidden him, but that which creates in him evil or pain. No dress is

taboo to him but that, which leads to sin and sorrow. No language is particularly his or his God's but that which men speak anywhere from the heart. No caste is high or low, nor no man a condemned sinner or sanctified being but he who is adjudged so in the Court of his Lord. Who are mortals to sit in judgment upon other mortals? At no time in the history of the world have men suffered so much to protect the faith of 'others' nor accepted the validity of other faiths with that catholicity as the Sikh faith. No other faith has raised to the level of its own scriptures utterances of divinity by men of diverse creeds. Toleration of another viewpoint is different; its integration with the spiritual life of a new experiment in the history of religion is different. (1986; 27)" Guru Nanak has created new formation wherein those spiritual experiences are acceptable which are true to God.

M. Muthumohan traces Guru Nanak's interfaith dialogue and its theological situation. He gives his opinion about the approach of Sikhism to Ultimate Reality. He observes that Guru creates new vision for the liberation of the society, As per him, "The Sikh Gurus refuse to place themselves within any sectarian way of thinking or to wear any particular religious garb. The Sikh hymnal poetry (Gurbani seems to be composed from the limit and boundary situations of humans, when the humans after losing hope in all human means surrender absolutely before the Divine. Truly, it is a state of spontaneity. It is this openness, which informs us that Guru Granth Sahib is the scripture of dialogue and justice." (2005;248) He also examines the critical spirit of Guru Nanak. In his views, "Guru Nanak's greatness lies in the fact that he had the courage to look at the merits and demerits of every religion from the point of view of the subaltern masses he was truly representing. The inter-religious conditions did not make him surrender before the environment (Muthumohan: 2002; 61)."

Dharam Singh elaborates theoretical as well as the practical aspects of Sikh attitude towards religious pluralism. With the reference of Guru Nanak's thought he writes, "No doubt, dialogue - with self as well as with others - is given much importance in the Sikh scripture, but it is not a mere mental or academic exercise. It goes a step further in asking man to live that truth in social life (Dharam Singh: 2005; 340)."

In comparative perspective, Darshan Singh explains the universal message of Guru Nanak and its pluralistic forms. According to him, "along with the belief in the unity of God and brotherhood of man, Guru Nanak empathetically recognizes the religious pluralism. All people can attain the grace, favour of God provided their prayer, and worship - whatever may

be its form is pure. The Guru tells the Muslim to be a good Muslim to the Hindu to be a good Hindu and to the yogi to be true yogi (Darshan Singh: 2005; 82)."

Shashi Bala tries to understand the concept of Sikh peace. She adopts comparative approach to examine the Sikh perspective. According to her, "The holy scripture, Guru Granth Sahib enunciates the concept of oneness of God and affirms the sanctity of whole existence. It stresses on the cultivation of universal values to promote peace in the whole universe. The approach of the Holy Scripture is holistic and integrative with emphasis on the dynamic and comprehensive aspect of Reality with a pragmatic vision to socialize religion by envisaging the sovereign self-identity of man as well as the collective amelioration of social conditions in the present world. (2005; 1034)"

Joy Barrow tries to understand the interfaith perspectives of Sikhs from her experience. She has examined the religious activities of the Sikhs in UK and found that Sikhs live at peace with other faith communities. She has observed the ways in which Sikhs contributed to the multi-faith community of Southall. She elaborates her views based on three cases. She gives two examples from Gurdwara of Southall. She notes, "When representatives of the Gurdwara in South Hall joined together with other faith leaders and local police to overcome community tensions, and when many of the Gurdwaras in West London joined together at the request of the local Education Authority to organize a three-week exhibition of Sikhism for Ealing School children, they represent the contribution of Gurdwaras. The third example, when local Sikhs in Southall, with the support of the Akal Purakh Fauj negotiated with a national organization (the Scout Association) to establish the First Sikh Scout Group in the UK in January 1998, is an example of the second type of Sikh organization. (Barrow: 2002; 42-43)" The above case studies show that Sikh are always ready to join hands with others because the Guru teaches them to serve the society as an act of God.

Above-mentioned studies show that interfaith dialogue is a need of the day. It should be encouraged to build a peaceful social milieu. Generally, an interfaith dialogue has supposed to be a cooperative interaction within the faiths. A positive attitude towards different faiths is a basic requirement for this. In addition to that, there is need of a critical approach to one's own and other faiths with kindness. Such a dialogue among the religions demands to pay an equal respect to all. Along with this attitude, we should be open to learn relatively from

others experience. Thus, an interfaith dialogue calls for respect to the rights, autonomy and identity of different faiths.

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